

Northern River Otter

Description:

River otters are especially known for their playfulness. On land, they slide in mud and snow along riverbanks, and frolic while chasing their tail. In the water they are agile and flexible, playing with sticks and even dropping pebbles to retrieve from the bottom of the river.

Not A Seal

The river otter is a medium-sized, semi-aquatic carnivore. Like fisher, marten, and mink, they have long, slender bodies, short limbs, and a face with prominent whitish whiskers. Their dark brown fur turns almost black when wet and can be silver-gray on the underside of the head and throat. Their long, smooth tail is over one-third of their body length and is thick at the base and gradually tapers to the tip.

On land, otters move similarly to an inchworm with a hump-backed gait at a fairly rapid pace. When they are on snow or ice, they move along rapidly by alternating a series of hops with belly sliding, achieving speeds of up to 15 miles per hour. The one-foot wide slides of the otter are the most obvious and best-known proof of their presence. Although river otters spend most of their time in water, they always leave their scat on land. It is rather easy to identify as it almost always is full of fish bones and scales.

Although river otters do have some similarities to seals in appearance, they are not closely related to seals. Otters are actually members of the weasel family. Mink, who are also members of the weasel family, are much smaller than otters, their feet are not webbed, and their tail is cylindrical, not tapered. Beavers are much stouter than otters and have a tail that is wide, flat, hairless, and scaly.

Where They Live

River otters can handle a variety of environments including warm latitudes and high elevations. Year round, river otters are most commonly found in or along wooded lakes, rivers, streams, and ponds. Presence of food determines their primary habitat, although they rarely live far from any type of water source. In Idaho, otters preferred lower valleys to high mountain habitats and smaller stream habitats rather than larger lakes, reservoirs, and ponds. Otters are often referred to as a flagship species for wetlands and aquatic habitats. Their presence indicates an area with ample, high-quality water.

Seafood?

With all the rivers in Idaho, there is an ample supply of aquatic animals for otters to eat, particularly fish, frogs, crayfish, and turtles. They also prey on nesting aquatic birds in some areas as well as insects, earthworms, small mammals and even juvenile muskrats and beavers. Prey is eaten immediately after it is captured, usually in the water, although larger prey is eaten on land.

Mortality

North American river otters are sometimes taken by bobcats, coyotes, birds of prey, alligators, and other large predators. However, perhaps the biggest threats to otters today are habitat loss, pollution, and overharvest. Harmful chemicals can accumulate in otter's bodies when they eat and drink things that have been contaminated. The most obvious impact on otters by humans results from trappers harvesting otters for their fur. However, where trapping occurs, agency biologists have the capability of regulating the harvest to ensure that otter populations are not adversely affected.

Aquatic Adaptations

River otters have a set of adaptations for their aquatic lifestyle. They can swim underwater for up to 6 miles per hour for 2 to 3 minutes. Their sleek and streamlined body, small eyes and ears, webbed feet with short claws, and long, rudder-type, tapered tail make them efficient swimmers and divers. Their dark brown fur is very dense, and provides good insulation and efficiently repels water. River otters are able to stay underwater for up to five minutes because their pulse slows down and skin flaps close the ears and nostrils. They have long whiskers which are used to detect organisms in the bottom of the dark water.

Reproduction and Offspring

In March or April, female otters in Idaho give birth to two or three young who are blind, fully furred, and weigh only five ounces. The young open their eyes at about one month of age. They must be taught to swim by the third or fourth month and leave the den. Young otters stay with their mother for about one year and reach sexual maturity at around two years.

The mother breeds again soon after her litter is born, but implantation of the embryos only takes place if the female is healthy enough to bear young. If the implantation is successful, the next litter will be born the following spring.

Hibernation?

River otters remain active all winter, even in fresh, deep snow and have been known to chase fish under the icy cold water. Otters are more likely to be diurnal (active during the day) in the winter when the temperatures are warmer, and nocturnal (active throughout the night) in other seasons.

Range/Distribution

River otters were once found throughout most of North America, but between over harvest, habitat loss, and riparian degradation, the population of this species has rapidly declined over much of the U.S.. Conservation and protection has helped otters return to most of their former range. They currently occupy 48 states and 11 provinces.

Otters are generally found near treeline across Alaska and Canada south through forested regions to northern California and northern Utah in the West, and Florida and the Gulf Coast in the East. It is



Northern River Otter
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Footprint
No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Northern River Otter
2. **Scientific Name:** *Lontra canadensis*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: 7.5-33 lbs.
Length (body): 35 to 54 inches.
Length (tail): 12 to 20 inches.
5. **Diet:** Fish, invertebrates, birds, mammals, and reptiles.
6. **Young:** 1-3 per year; called pups.
7. **Lifespan:** 8-9 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**

largely absent form the Midwest and the Great Plains.